

## **Summer will wake (Winter will crave what has gone)** **by LiaGwriter**

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**Summary:** Vignettes of El and Mike, as they grow - alone and together - through summer and winter and back again. [Written for the Mileven Week 2019 theme, 'Seasons']

## **Summer will wake (Winter will crave what has gone)**

In the lab, El's experience of cold comes only from the surroundings she knows. There's the chill she always gets after she leaves the tank, a cold that lingers for hours as she shivers under the thin blanket in her room. Every surface she touches there seems devoid of heat; the cool metal railings, the steel examining tables, the wire cables they sometimes attach to her head.

And then there's the frigid, damp dark of the cell that Papa drags her to when she refuses to cooperate, to go any further. In that room, there's a cold that seeps into her bones and settles there, making her shrink into herself, helpless and terrified, waiting for it to go away — for someone, anyone, to let her back into the light.

She doesn't know much about the outside, how there are regular periods of time where the air gets even colder than that room. She doesn't know that each year, without fail, time passes and eventually, the warmth comes.

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The winter before Mike finds El, there's a long stretch of sub-zero temperatures. It's cold enough that the students at Hawkins Middle are ushered inside right away in the mornings, cutting out the usual time they have to linger in the front yard before the first bell rings. Mike and his friends are grateful for this, because that winter, Troy's bullying intensifies — and any small reprieve from it is more than welcome.

The cold weather also makes for the perfect excuse to plan marathon D&D sessions. The Party spends most weekend afternoons huddled around the card table in Mike's basement, submerged in a mythical world they build together, grateful for the temporary escape.

It's an escape Mike begins to rely on, especially as he starts to notice that his parents are arguing more; late at night and in hushed voices, when they think no one can hear. He considers talking to Nancy about it, but something has shifted with her — their closeness has waned as she's grown up, and she's always concerned over things Mike can't quite grasp.

He begins to understand what loneliness feels like, and the hours stretch out too long on those days where the air is so cold everything feels static. The heat of summer feels so far away, and he thinks about the things that have been left behind there, the things that aren't the same anymore.

Something has to break. Something has to change.

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El barely has time to register the way the leaves crunch under her bare feet on the day she escapes from the lab — but she remembers the sound more than anything, the way that, in her heightened state of fear and adrenaline, it was almost deafening.

She notices it again when her and Mike are walking side by side on the train tracks, through the forest where the trees are mostly bare and the ground is covered in their offerings; red and orange and pale yellows. It's more colour than El's ever seen, a sharp contrast to the pallid, monochrome greys and whites of the lab.

Mike sees her smiling as she looks around, and he nudges her arm. "What is it?" he asks, in that same gentle voice he seems to use only with her.

El isn't sure how to say everything that's really on her mind; how grateful she is just to be here, outside in the world, witnessing things she never thought she'd see. Or how good it feels to have Mike's sweater, keeping her warm against the cool breeze that makes the trees above them sway.

"I... like how it looks, here," she says, gesturing to the landscape in front of them.

"Yeah, it's nice," Mike replies, glancing around, "Not as nice as summer, though, when everything's green - I like it better then."

El just smiles at him, imagining it in her head — them walking together in the same place, blanketed by warmth and sunshine. It's hard to memorize something you've never seen, but she does, then, committing the idea to her mind like a dream.

She holds on to it.

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The nights after El disappears are the longest of the year — that listless stretch of weeks before the season catches up with itself, and more daylight creeps in — but it doesn't make a difference to Mike. He spends most of them awake anyways, lying restlessly in the dark, that night at the school coming to him in flashes.

Usually, he dreams that he saved her; that she didn't walk toward the monster, but back into his arms instead. When he wakes from these dreams, a mix of anger and sadness keep him from falling back asleep. Sometimes when this happens, he goes down to the living room and sits in the same spot he was in on the night she disappeared; the spot from which he was sure he saw her in the window.

Though he's since convinced himself that it was just his desperate mind playing tricks on him, sometimes, sitting there in the quiet, he imagines she'll appear again. He imagines that he'll go to her, bring her in from the cold, set her up in the blanket fort downstairs that he still hasn't taken down.

It's the time of year where the world feels the most still, where everything is plunged into darkness more than it is light. This is what Mike hopes for as he sits there, looking out the window into the pitch-black night: that maybe the same darkness that took her will bring her back to him.

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El learns the real meaning of *cold* during the period of time she spends out in the woods, lost and hiding, embroiled in nature's ruthless dark side. She's constantly shivering, never able to fully warm up, even when she builds fires or pilfers a large jacket from a man she encounters.

The worst part about it is the quiet. Even the wind sounds hollow, passing through with a sharp bite that stings her skin. In the fitful sleep she is able to get, she always dreams that she's trapped in the Upside Down, and her surroundings feel just like it; the perpetual darkness, the presence of death prevalent in the stillness of the trees.

The cold penetrates her heart, her mind. She's alone, with nowhere to go and no plan, and though she's hopeful that someone might be looking for her, she tries not to think about it too long — if she loses that hope, she's not sure what will be left to keep her going.

Sometimes when the despair is overwhelming, she hugs her arms around herself and thinks about the warmest place she knows: the fort in Mike's basement. She pictures herself curled up in it, wearing his sweater, or maybe huddled in the tan jacket he draped over her on that first night. She thinks about being there with Mike; his smile, his eyes, his warm hands holding hers.

She imagines this and it keeps a light within her switched on; safe in a place no cold can ever touch.

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The Christmas prior passed in a dull blur, Mike too fraught with missing El to really engage with any of it. But this year, it's like he's noticing every good thing about the season for the first time: the way the lights on the tree bathe the living room in a warm glow, or how nearly every house on his street has their decorations up early.

What keeps him up at night isn't flashbacks of El's disappearance, but rather, conversations with her over the Supercomm. Most nights, they talk until one of them falls asleep, El whispering so as not to wake Hopper in the next room.

Mike hasn't been able to see her since the Snowball, and though it's frustrating, the memory of that night is enough to keep him afloat. He never gets tired of running through it in his mind. It's the kiss he always pauses on; the feeling of El's lips pressed against his, the way she smiled at him shyly after, cheeks flushed. His breath still catches when he thinks about her walking into the gym — how her eyes had looked so scared and distant until they met his, like she'd finally found what she was looking for.

He stays down in the fort when they talk, blankets pulled around him, an ever-present smile on his face as he listens to her voice. He tells her a lot about Christmas, about how everyone always hopes for a white one with snow, because that makes it feel the way it's supposed to.

"I wish I could see you, on the real day," El tells him one night, her voice low and sleepy.

Mike tries not to let her hear how sad this makes him, not wanting to disappoint her any further. "I know, El. Me too," he says, "Next year, though, we will. And it'll be a white one."

"Promise?" El whispers back.

Mike clutches the Supercomm, his eyes closing as he smiles to himself. "Promise."

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Through the window in her room at Hopper's cabin, El watches summer take hold. It's the leaves she notices first, turning green and vibrant, just like Mike described. Though she still struggles with feeling confined, this renews a sense of energy in her, like there's so much possibility in this turn towards warmth and light.

It gets even more perfect when school lets out and Mike starts to come to the cabin earlier in the day, leaving hours open for them to just be together. They go for walks along a path that Hopper delineates, their hands always clasped together.

Sometimes they lie back and watch the clouds pass over the treetops, El's head on Mike's chest, his fingers gently tracing along her back. Hearing the steady thrum of his heartbeat calms her, allows her to drown out everything around them. In these moments El feels like she could be anywhere; like her and Mike are two pinpoints on a neverending map, watching the sky move and change while they stay rooted in place.

Like Lucas, Mike's grown a lot taller over the preceding months, so much so that El has to stand on her tiptoes to kiss him. She doesn't mind though, because it means he holds her even closer, and she loves the way his arms wrap all the way around her waist when he tugs her upward.

El notices distinct changes in herself, too: physical ones, like the way her hair grows down past her ears, and other things, like how quickly she can get through the books that Hopper brings home for her every

week now. She's catching up, and the summer gets warmer and warmer, the dappled sunlight waking her up each morning.

One night, sitting out on the cabin's porch with Mike, she finds the perfect word to describe it all. They've fallen into a comfortable silence, her head resting on his shoulder, when she sees it: a small prick of light appearing in the dark, then disappearing a moment later, like a switch being turned off.

She lifts her head, eyes wide as she looks at Mike. "Did you see that?"

He frowns at her. "See what?"

She points ahead, but before she can say anything, two more dots of light appear in a quick flash, and Mike sees them, too. "What is it?" El asks, standing up and walking to the railing.

He comes up behind her, wrapping his arms around her and nestling his chin in the crook of her neck. "Magic," he mutters, as more dots of light appear before them.

"Mike," she says, laughing, "Come on, tell me what it is."

"Alright well, the *technical term* is fireflies," he tells her, "They're full of this chemical stuff that they use to make themselves light up. Pretty cool, huh?"

El doesn't respond right away, still transfixed on the glowing specks dancing in front of them. After a moment she turns her head a little, looking right into his eyes. "Yeah," she whispers, "Magic."

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Mike never really liked fall much. He always viewed it as the end of a special kind of freedom, and as much as he enjoys school, there were never enough of those golden days, with no plans and nothing to worry about.

In the final moments of watching the Byers drive away, El along with them, he realizes that for the first time, it's the real end of something. Not of him and El, or the Party, but of an era — *their* era, however small and insignificant it might be to the rest of the world. There would be no more Saturday D&D marathons, or regular movie nights,

or afternoons at the cabin with El, walking in the woods and lying back to watch the clouds drift.

All of those things felt so infinite in the moment, like they could never change, and as he bikes away from the Byers home for the last time, he feels angry at how foolish he was to ever believe that.

He spends the rest of the way home trying to fight this feeling off, desperate to hold on to the good things, those idyllic memories that aren't so far away yet. When he finally makes it up to his room, he goes to his desk, pulling out an old notebook and ripping some pages loose as he sits down and reaches for a pen.

*Dear El,* he writes,

*I know it seems stupid to write you a letter when I know we're going to talk all the time, but I guess I wanted to get some things out, you know? Things that might be hard to say, or just things I want to write down because I don't want to forget them. Do you remember that night at the cabin when we saw the fireflies? I do, because I remember the way you asked...*

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It's cold enough that El can see her breath, and she pulls her jacket sleeves down over her hands as her and Mike linger in his garage. It's Christmas Eve, and she arrived in town with the Byers earlier that day. Though they know they'll see each other the next morning, the hours feel too precious to waste any moment they have together, just the two of them.

Everyone else is still clambering out of the house, talking outside their idling cars, like no one else wants the night to be over either. Mike tugs her arm a little and she follows as he leans back against the wall, pulling her close so they're both out of view. Instinctively, El wraps her arms around his neck, using one hand to brush her thumb across his cheek.

"I - I'm so happy you're home, El, you have no idea," Mike says, his voice just above a whisper. "I missed you so much."

"Me too," El breathes, "So much." She moves to rest her cheek against

his chest, wanting to hear the familiar beat of his heart, the way it could make everything okay, even just for a moment.

She feels him nudge her and she leans back, smiling as he reaches to cup her face in his hands. They look at each other for a long moment, holding still in the shadowy darkness, not needing — never needing — to fill the quiet. When Mike finally leans down to kiss her, it makes her feel like she's taking her first full breath in so long, and she presses in closer, holding on to him as tightly as she can, making up for lost time.

A shout of laughter nearby causes them to break apart, but El holds Mike's gaze, wanting to convey all the feelings that are spilling over within her. They both turn to look out at the driveway, where the headlights of Joyce's car illuminate the snow that's been falling all night.

El glances back up at Mike, smiling when he catches her eye. "It's going to be a white one," she says.

He tilts his head to the side a little, like he's not following. "What do you mean?"

"A white Christmas," El replies, "Just like you promised."

Mike doesn't say anything for a long while, and though it's dark, El thinks she sees tears in his eyes. When he speaks, his voice is thick with emotion. "I knew it would be."

"I can't wait to give you your present," she whispers, poking him playfully in the side. With Joyce's help, she picked out a new leather-bound journal for him, after he told her during one of their long talks that he wanted to try to start writing more.

"A present? For me? You *shouldn't have*," he teases, making her laugh. "I can't wait to give you yours, either."

El stretches up to kiss him again, overcome with the feeling of being in his arms, of simply being able to *be* with him, in person. After a moment one of the cars in the driveway honks, and they part again.

Reluctantly, El starts to walk away, holding Mike's hand until the last

possible moment. "See you tomorrow morning?"

"Yep, first thing." He turns to her as they reach Joyce's car. "Merry white Christmas, El."

She smiles at him one more time. "Merry white Christmas, Mike."

She waves as they pull away, watching him wave back until he's out of sight. As snowflakes rush past the car's window, El thinks about the woods, about what it looks like there when it's blanketed in snow. It's not far from where she is now, but the idea of it feels strange and distant.

When she was there, she was afraid to hold on to promises, sure they would never come — but they did, somehow. Even in the dark and quiet places, they did.

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*Cheers to another Mileven Week, and please leave your thoughts!*

*Also, stay tuned, because I have something in the works that I'm very excited about, and it's coming very shortly... and I absolutely cannot wait to share it!*